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# Character and the Space of *Clarel*

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Needs be my soul,  
Purged by the desert's subtle air  
From bookish vapors, now is heir  
To nature's influx of control;  
(NN *Clarel* 1.1.67–70)

## Character and the Impersonal

From Ahab to Bartleby, and Isabel to Billy Budd, Melville's characters seem unmoored from personhood, cast into the "whelming sea" of the impersonal or the inhuman (NN *Clarel* 4.35.33).<sup>1</sup> In *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, they are not so much characters in the traditional literary sense—that is, individual "persons" who move through settings and perform a set of characteristics—as they are a series of intertwined "personae" whose characteristics blur with the space of the poem. As in his other works, Melville's characterization in *Clarel* is a process not of developing distinct persons but of opening a transactive space in which human characteristics can become unbound and thus permeable to the extra-personal. Yet in *Clarel*, given the symbolically charged landscape of the Holy Land, Melville's emptying out of character also involves a forceful deromanticization of the landscape. Melville postulates a world in which traditional guarantees of human value are removed, and wherein the traditional barriers that divide self and nature and the human and inhuman are rendered inconsequential. Melville gestures past Romantic conceptions of landscape and self into an uncertain post-Darwinian territory in which the sublime education is no longer an ecstatic self-abandonment but one of suspension and doubt. The dissolutions of the self into the Absolute in *Moby-Dick*—Ishmael melting into the universal "milk and sperm of kindness" (NN MD 416), the "absent minded young philosophers" becoming one with the "mystic ocean" (159)—and the transcendent "all" feeling which Melville circumspectly describes in his letter to Hawthorne (NN *Corres* 194) are instead in *Clarel* a mutual defacement of both the human visage and the face of the earth. Individual subjective characteristics are not fused into a cosmic unity but are erased or dispersed and thus freed to move past the

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coordinates of the human and personal to transact with the varied non-human spaces of Melville's Holy Land.

Before exploring the relation between character and space in *Clarel*, however, we can first gain contingent footing by considering a striking description of impersonality in one of Melville's lesser-known characters. In *Moby-Dick*, the *Pequod's* carpenter is "singularly efficient" in addressing "all the thousand nameless mechanical emergencies recurring in a large ship" and, therefore, would "seem to argue some uncommon vivacity of intelligence" (NN MD 467). Yet, we soon learn, this is "not precisely so": "For nothing was this man more remarkable, than for a certain impersonal stolidity . . . impersonal, I say; for it so shaded off into the surrounding infinitude of things, that it seems one with the general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world" (467). A proverbial rolling stone, the carpenter not only gathered no moss in the course of his world-wanderings but also "had rubbed off whatever small outward clings might have originally pertained to him" (468). He becomes a departicularized figure, a proto-Bartleby, "stript abstract; an unfractioned integral; uncompromised as a new-born babe; living without premeditated reference to this world or next" (468). Shorn of the characteristics typical of a "person" or of a "human," he is nonetheless not a "mere machine or automaton" but a "pure manipulator," "omnitooled" (468) like a modern-day Swiss Army knife. "If he did not have a common soul in him, he had a subtle something that somehow anomalously did its duty . . . [an] unaccountable, cunning life-principle" (467–68).

Melville's description is remarkable insofar as it dissociates the character of the carpenter from the usual coordinates of personhood in favor of an "impersonal stolidity," an impassivity not of reason or instinct but of a "sort of unintelligence" (NN MD 468). Here, Melville defines "impersonal" not as an intrinsic characteristic (as a coldness or impoliteness, for example) but instead as a mode of external relation. The carpenter's stolidity is impersonal because it "shade[s] off" into the "surrounding infinitude of things" and unifies him with what is beyond the human or the personal, the "general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world." Unlike Ahab in "The Candles" whose "queenly personality" stands "in the midst of the personified impersonal," the carpenter does not remain bound to the identity coordinates of a willing subject (507). Thus, Ahab can hyperbolically contrast himself to the carpenter as a god to an inanimate object: "Oh, Life! Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on!" (471).

Like the carpenter, many of Melville's characters could be said to be such "unfractioned integrals"; they "shade off" into the "surrounding infinitude of things." For this reason, critics have remarked that conventional designations

such as “individual,” “person,” or “human” lose their relevance in Melville’s writing. As Jonathan Arac writes, “individuality is neither a goal nor a premise. At best it is a puzzling possibility” (Arac 731). Ishmael fantasizes about a realm of communal “felicity” in which men might not only “squeeze hands all around” but also squeeze “into each other” and “universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.” Even Ahab’s tormented individuality becomes nullified by his “supreme purpose”; he seems “a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light . . . but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself” (NN MD 416, 202).

Sharon Cameron, in her suggestive work on *Billy Budd in Impersonality: Seven Essays*, further details how Melville’s characters become open to that which exceeds the personal or characterological: “Something—an excess that does not pertain to character—nonetheless passes through it, making characters permeable to attributes that are not uniquely theirs. . . . Character remains intact but inconsequential—not transcended but surpassed” (*Impersonality* xiii). Through this excess of personality, which Cameron formulates in terms of a “set of expressions” that go beyond the boundaries of individuality, Melville “renders individuality and its undoing coterminous” (194). Characters (and the characteristics which are purported to define them) overflow into one another; they become suffused by the inhuman world. Abel kills Cain: peaceable Billy becomes a killer, as malignant Claggart becomes a slain innocent. As Billy is hanged, the surrounding world envelopes him: the “vapory fleece hanging low in the East” is “shot through with a soft glory” such that he takes on “the full rose of dawn”; the freshet-wave swells, “dubious in significance”; seafowl fly “screaming to the spot” (*Billy Budd* 514–16). For Cameron, *Billy Budd*’s characters enact an inevitable “unbinding from the personal manifested as an unbinding from the human” (*Impersonality* xiii). This double unbinding, which, for Cameron, is impelled by Melville’s late reading of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, makes legible Melville’s impersonality as an essential “indifference” of all things: “the essence of a stone and the essence of a mind are the same (not just the same kind of) thing” (x). As the foundation of personal identity “erodes,” so does the distinction between a stone and a human, or between Billy and a “manifestation of light” (198, 182).

Gilles Deleuze, in his critical essay, “Bartleby; or, The Formula,” similarly sketches how Melville’s characters undo the representational coherences which govern personhood or human particularity. For Deleuze, figures such as Bartleby, Isabel, or Billy Budd open a “zone of indetermination or indiscernability in which neither words nor characters can be distinguished” (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 76). Characters merge with one another and their surroundings; they become atmospheric events or reverberations which pass

into the affective landscape. Deleuze invokes Melville's "original" character in *The Confidence-Man* as the epitome of this process of dissociation from fixed identity. Following Melville's description of the original as a "revolving Drummond light" (NN CM 239), Deleuze's original "throws a livid white light on his surroundings"; it is "sometimes the immobile source of this light—like the foretopman high up on the mast, Billy Budd the bound, hanged man who 'ascends' with the glimmering of the dawn, or Bartleby standing in the attorney's office—and sometimes its dazzling passage, a movement too rapid for the ordinary eye to follow, the lightning of Ahab or Claggart" (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 83). For both Cameron and Deleuze, Melville's characters are unconfined to the personal; they become processes by which personal characteristics become emancipated, or given over to an excess. Like the carpenter from *Moby-Dick*, they "shed" onto their "surroundings" (NN CM 239).<sup>2</sup>

Here, the contention is that the work of Cameron and Deleuze concerning the characterological and the impersonal provides a critical optic through which to explore how Melville's characters in *Clarel* pervade the space of the poem and are pervaded by it. The space of the poem—as a written space, as a physical space of desert and rocks, and as an imaginative space of striated biblical, literary, philosophic, and scientific reference—does not merely serve as backdrop to the movements of Melville's pilgrims but resonates with them in dynamic, reciprocal tension. Characters become compressed by Jerusalem's narrow corridors and closed-in spaces or expand to take on aspects of the barren topography of the Palestinian wilderness. They become constituted and deconstituted by these spaces, purged by the desert's subtle air or wracked by its irresolvable dubiousness. They write across disfeatured brows of rock and become sites of inscription and erasure. They press on uncertain thresholds between the personal and impersonal, between the human and inhuman. In *Clarel*, characters become stones and stones become characters.

### Reflections of Jehovah's Town

To contextualize the discussion of how character exceeds the personal in the landscape of *Clarel*, we can first consider how Melville's pilgrims resonate within the stone spaces of Jerusalem. In "The Cavalcade," the "clatter" of Melville's pilgrims "jars" Jerusalem, if not the text itself:

Adown the Dolorosa Lane  
The mounted pilgrims file in train  
Whose clatter jars each open space;  
Then, muffled in, shares change apace  
As, striking sparks in vaulted street,  
Clink, as in cave, the horse's feet. (NN *Clarel* 2.1.1–6)

These lines open Book 2 of *Clarel*, “The Wilderness,” and signal the departure of the procession from Jerusalem, which threads down the Via Dolorosa, out St. Stephen’s Gate to Gethsemane and the desert beyond. As the pilgrims pass open doors, Hadrian’s forum, and other vacant spaces, their “clatter” resounds, jarring these spaces, such that each space registers their movement. As the pilgrims tuck in between old walls and through the narrow Ecce Homo arch, their echoes are “muffled in”; metal hooves strike sparks on stone. With jolting prosody, they follow the way of sorrows: the words “muffled in” are compressed by the surrounding pauses, the frictions of the consonant blends of “strike,” “spark,” and “street” hit against the hard-C sounds of “clink” and “cave.”

These sonic overtones counterpoint Melville’s description in his journal of “wearily climbing the Via Dolorosa” as a traveler in January 1857 (NN *Journals* 89). There, he details the “*Interior of Jerusalem*,” a “City like a quarry,” whose “silence and solitude” are punctuated only by the “muezzin calling to prayer from the minaret of Omer” and the “*Talk of the guides*:—‘Here is the stone Christ leaned against, & here is the English hotel.’ Yonder is the arch where Christ was shown to the people, & just by that open window is sold the best coffee in Jerusalem, &c. &c. &c.” (89). Melville’s Jerusalem is a city of such “venerable” stones and windows, “steep wynds” and “space[s] less confined,” “thick wall[s] pierced by . . . gateway[s],” “elaborate sculptures” and “nibbled” away facades (88–89). Those who thread Dolorosa’s way become clinks in a series of stone echo-chambers.<sup>3</sup>

“The Cavalcade” transposes these journal passages. It extends the earlier canto “The Arch” and anticipates the poem’s penultimate canto, “Via Crucis,” as *Clarel*, returned from his “rarer quest” (NN *Clarel* 4.34.54), lags behind the din of people and animals. As “The Cavalcade” continues, its prosody registers the syncopated movement of the pilgrims:

Not from brave Chaucer’s Tabard Inn  
They pictured wend; scarce shall they win  
Fair Kent, and Canterbury ken;  
Nor franklin, squire, nor morris-dance  
Of wit and story good as then:  
Another age, and other men,  
And life an unfulfilled romance. (2.1.7–13)

The anastrophe of “They pictured wend” contorts the reader into Jerusalem’s winding alleys; the rhythm in *wend-win* and *Kent-Cant-ken-kin* hesitantly jolts along, tripping across negations and caesurae, an out-of-step morris dance. Hesitation is scored in the stone-prosody of the poem, sending fissures down through its layered architectures and compacted ruins. Kafka’s aphorism might

be true of *Clarel*: “There is a destination, but no way there; what you refer to as a way is hesitation” (Kafka 26). *Clarel* becomes a pilgrimage of hesitation, an “unfulfilled romance.” So despite a bouncing, “picaresque” tone that might echo Boccaccio or Chaucer, Melville’s pilgrims in the “The Cavalcade” are not merely another version of Chaucer’s “sondry folk” (Chaucer 23). They pass down a via Dolorosa cut between a *terra santa* and a barren *terra damnata*, between belief and non-belief. They belong to “Another age, and other men.”

As they pass into the wilderness, Melville’s narrator “limns” the pilgrims in relation to the spaces they jar and which jar them. They acquire sets of descriptions, sometimes in the manner of Homeric epithets, which serve to orient them to one another and to the landscape. The “Black Jew” who “reflects Jehovah’s town” (NN *Clarel* 1.44.39), salutes the pilgrims as they exit the gate. After the “turban—guide and guard / In escort armed and desert trim” there follows Derwent, who “Cordial . . . turned his aspect clear / On all that passed” and an “Elder,” who, lacking natural piety, would “Quite disenchant the Land Divine” (2.14–15, 21–22, 79). Next comes a “banker of the rich Levant”—a cosmopolitan figure in “Parisian” “garb” and “Angora rug, for shawl”—accompanied by Glaucon, “a sprig of Smyrna,” both of whom return to Jerusalem before ever confronting the Palestinian landscape (2.1.104, 118, 120, 156). At the rear of the procession, after the supply-mules and a prototypical ass upon which the “good” Nehemiah sits, are the “main characters” of *Clarel*: “earnest” Clarel, “Indian-like” Rolfe, and daydreaming Vine, “In reminiscence folded over,” “At whiles in face a dusk and shiver” (2.1.195, 222–37). Celio is depicted as a chemical reaction: “‘Neath Zion’s lee / His nature, with that nature blent, / Evoked an upstart element, / As do the acid and the alkali” (1.12.148–51). And later in the poem, to name just two among the vast array of minor characters, is the Celibate of Mar Saba, whose “robe of blue / So sorted with the doves in hue / Prevailing, and clear skies serene / Without a cloud” (3.30.40–43) and who lived “In the pure desert of the will” (3.30.122), as well as the timoneer Agath, “schooled by the inhuman sea” (4.13.7). Often in *Clarel*, personal characteristics are not wrought in terms of what could be called inherent qualities but include aspects of the extra-personal—the city, the desert sky, the sea. These characteristics, if individualized, nonetheless add up to a collective, impersonal force across the poem. The poem is a catalogue of depersonalizations in which the landscape presses on characters and effaces boundaries of the individual and the human. Characters are nibbled away facades, buried furrows in the sand or sea, hues of doves or desert air.

Melville takes advantage of the “form” of the pilgrimage to collect varied individuals into a single grouping, such that they might exert this collective force. Much like the “mariners, renegades, and castaways” who are “federated

along the keel” of the *Pequod* (NN MD 117), *Clarel’s* cavalcade is another “wrangling crew” (NN *Clarel* 1.44.27), a reprise of the Anacharsis Cloutz procession of universal humanity but with its attendant animals. In “Via Crucis,” the collective form of the Whitsuntide procession allows for a blurring of the human and animal: “In varied forms of fate they wend— / Or man or animal, ’tis one: / Cross-bearers all, alike they tend / And follow, slowly follow on” (4.34.41–44). By definition, Melville’s pilgrims exhibit an exceptional relationship to the land. Received in English as an alteration of the Latin *peregrinus*, as in the related word “peregrination,” the pilgrim is a foreigner who goes through the land—*per-agre*—but has no right to practice agriculture on it. We can hear this alienated relation in Thoreau’s double “etymology” of the word “saunterer,” which he offers at the outset of “Walking”: that pilgrims *à la Sainte Terre* (to the Holy Land) proceed *sans terre* (without land or home) and thus “are at home everywhere” (Thoreau 22). Most pilgrims are not saunterers in Thoreau’s sense but concertedly move towards a specific place to immerse themselves in, if not abandon themselves to, its symbolic meaning. Every place has its “enchantments” or, as D. H. Lawrence would say, its “spirit”—each “home,” “America,” or the “East” is certainly more than a mere place on a map. Yet for the religious pilgrim, the site of pilgrimage exerts a special magnetism wherein the physical is drawn to the metaphysical, where the spirit might rise “above the dust” (NN *Clarel* 4.35.11).

To this end, Melville’s journal and *Clarel* are remarkable for their descriptions of how the Holy Land can affect the traveler and thus help reveal the structure of psycho-geographical depersonalization. In an often-cited journal passage from January 1857, Melville details how he “offered” himself to be affected by Jerusalem, as many a pilgrim might: “In pursuance of my object, the saturation of my mind with the atmosphere of Jerusalem, offering myself up as a passive subject, and no unwilling one, to its weird impressions, I always rose at dawn & walked without the walls” (NN *Journals* 86). As a “passive subject,” Melville allows its symbolic landscape—its atmosphere—to overtake him, if not to saturate his mind. Branka Arsić, in *Passive Constitutions, or 7½ Times Bartleby*, develops a compelling notion of Melville’s passivity not as a form of “tiredness” but as a “receptacle” or an “atmosphere” in a way that throws light on this passage and further orients *Clarel* as an impersonal poem. Arsić writes:

For the passivity of the receptacle is like the passivity of the grass or of the wind or the unformed atmosphere that spreads around like an instinct, without knowing itself. . . . It is the passivity of what is formless, impersonal, and faceless. It is as if Melville were announcing that writing is all about losing one’s face and becoming imperceptible (Arsić 9).



Melville gives himself over to the weird impressions of Jerusalem, allowing them to “spread around” him or collect in him. As he draws on the experiences written in his journal in writing *Clarel*, Melville is not so much rearranging them into a new form as opening them to an impersonal otherness. This reorientation complicates Walter E. Bezanson’s claims that in *Clarel* “the preferred term of the poem is ‘self,’” and that *Clarel* is a “personal poem” in which Melville’s “filaments of self spread through it everywhere, so much so that one feels Melville welcomed it as a chance for sorting out some old entanglements in his own history” (NN *Clarel* 579, 587). Rather, *Clarel* is an impersonal poem. Melville does not so much re-imagine past experiences or “project his ego” into characters and spaces as act as a passive receptacle for a set of characters whose “individual traits elevate them to a vision that carries them off in an indefinite [direction]” (Deleuze 3), a vision that sweeps through them or persistently pulls them away from personality into the inhuman world.

Melville sketches his characters in *Clarel* along the lines of this passivity. They are suffused with Jerusalem’s atmosphere; they allow unformed visions from “otherwhere” (NN *Clarel* 3.21.21) to slip in unnoticed. Sea visions flood Palestine’s vacated deserts: “Sand immense / Impart the oceanic sense” (2.11.36–37; see also Bezanson, in NN *Clarel* 583–87). Galapagos tortoises creep across the page in “The Island,” and the hills of Bethlehem become “Tahiti’s beach” (4.18.36). Desert sands modulate into the grass waves of a distant America as the New World hovers above the Old: “With Clarel seemed to come / A waftage from the fields of home, / Crossing the wind from Judah’s sand” (1.27.99–101). Characters, as constituted by and within these dynamic spaces or imaginative landscapes, become part of the multi-layering of the Holy Land’s psycho-geography. Yet, they not only engage a pre-formed symbolic texture but also rend this texture, or become suspended in it, deconstituting both themselves and the landscape.

### The Something Dubious in the Holy Land

**M**elville’s “passivity” finds poetic pre-figuration in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” a poem infamous for its depictions of the mind’s response to the force of nature:

My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around; (Shelley 90)

Like Shelley, whose vision implicitly shapes Melville's aesthetic in his journal and poetry, Melville is concerned with the force that landscape exerts on the human mind or, as he says in *Clarel*, "nature's influx of control" (1.1.70).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Melville translates the "Dizzying Ravine!" (Shelley 90) of the Arve or the wild broodings of Mont Blanc in terms of the strange impressions of Jerusalem and the austere solitude of its environs (see also Kelley, *Melville's City* 257–61). In a similar journal passage to the one quoted above, Melville relates how both the deep history embedded in the land and the land itself provoke an affective response: "Had Jerusalem no peculiar historic associations, still would it, by its extraordinary physical aspect, evoke peculiar emotion in the traveler" (NN *Journals* 89). This "extraordinary physical aspect" is the region's stark stoniness: "Judea is one accumulation of stones—Stony mountains & stony plains; stony torrents & stony roads; stony walls & stony fields, stony houses and stony tombs; stony eyes and stony hearts" (90). As with the great pyramid of Egypt or the white whale, the immensity of the physical evokes a feeling that saturates the physical and threatens to exceed it. He notes how the "diabolical" landscapes of Judea "[could suggest] to the prophets their terrific theology" (91).<sup>5</sup> Yet confronted with this physicality, Melville wavers in a blank middle-space in which the transit to the metaphysical cannot be made. The Holy Land remains equivocal, its message dubious, hopelessly buried in its piles of mute stones.

In contrast to Thoreau's saunterers, then, Melville's pilgrims are nowhere at home. Melville ironically undercuts the solemnity of the Holy Land's solemn places to the extent that he may be called an anti-pilgrim.<sup>6</sup> Along the Via Dolorosa, he locates the best take-out coffee in Jerusalem; he speculates that a bachelor's apartment may be situated above the Ecce Homo Arch. His sterile descriptions of Judea in his journal and stony passages in *Clarel* confront the hypocrisies of the romanticization of the Holy Land: "No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine—particularly Jerusalem. To some the disappointment is heart sickening. &c." (NN *Journals* 91). He scornfully details the pilgrims' "maledictory contributions" and the "sickening cheat" of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is "tacitly confessed" on the "countenances" of the poorest & most ignorant pilgrims . . . as well as your own" (88).

In *Clarel*, the confrontation with the romanticization of the Holy Land is both dramatized in the dialogues between characters and mediated by the landscape itself. *Clarel* is a multi-layering of landscape, mindscape, and textscape in which characters become interwoven personae, a "braided polyphony" of voices tangled in a symbolic topography (Derrida 162). As Bezanson aptly shows:

The starkly symbolic landforms through which they move serve as magnets on their buried lives. Between the routine acts of horseback travel, the staged exchanges of rational discourse, a dreamworld of psychic reality swirls about them . . . Most characters enter the poem at a significant site . . . Nehemiah [is] discovered on the way to Emmaus, Celio by the demoniac caves at Gihon, and Vine on the porch of the Sepulcher of Kings. Rolfe first appears wandering on Olivet, above Gethsemane, a hint of his role as the restless explorer of the Passion. Margoth, with gross pertinence, is first seen down amidst the filth by the Dung Gate. Shortly after such first appearances there comes, usually, a canto of personal ecology—earnest fragments of fact and speculation about the kind of man he may be in terms of the kind of experience he may have had (NN *Clarel* 577).

The magnetism exerted by landforms on the characters' "buried lives" at points renders this "personal ecology" indiscernible from the "ecology" of the landscape. This complicates any "hypothetical process of individuation" that characters of a narrative usually undergo (Specq 176). They become saturated by the richness of their homelessness, coextensive with the city of Jerusalem and Judea as each crumbles under the weight of historical and theological reference.

Typically, a pilgrim is saturated by the symbolic resonances of a specific destination in order to affirm a belief system. But in *Clarel*, Melville's pilgrims are saturated by the inability of the land to perform its symbolic function. Melville limns a set of wandering passive subjects. The Banker and Glaucon "wandered, anywhere, at will. / Scarce through self-knowledge or self-love / They ventured Judah's wilds to rove"; Vine seemingly moves "From solitude to solitude" (NN *Clarel* 2.1.172–74, 243). Throughout the complex, unfinished *bildungsroman*, Clarel wavers between uncertain subject positions, themselves projected into the landscape. In "The Start" (which immediately precedes "The Cavalcade"), Clarel seeks to understand his troubled mind by appealing to the land and sky for meaning:

Clarel regards; then turns his eye  
Away from all, beyond the town,  
Where pale against the tremulous sky  
Olivet shows in morning shy;  
Then on the court again looks down.  
The mountain mild, the wrangling crew—  
In contrast, why should these indue  
With vague unrest, and swell the sigh?  
Add to the burden? tease the sense  
With unconfirmed significance? (1.44.22–31).

Similarly, in “The Easter Fire”:

Clarel, as if in search of aught  
To mitigate unwelcome thought,  
Appealed to turret, crag and star;  
But all was strange, withdrawn and far. (3.16.120–23)

Whereas the ardent believer can turn for metaphysical certainty to the rich symbolism embedded in the Holy Land, Clarel, assailed by unwelcome doubt, can find no significance confirmed: “turret, crag, and star” remain coldly distant. The unsettling effect of the land is almost unbearable for Clarel in “Through Adommin”: “With thoughtful mien / The student fared, nor might withstand / The something dubious in the Holy Land” (2.9.103–5).

Melville thematizes this “something dubious” in “Of Deserts,” in which he invokes Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” through Darwin’s citation of Shelley’s poem in his *The Voyage of the Beagle*, appended to his description of the “stillness and desolation” of Tierra del Fuego in late 1833 (Darwin 169). The lines Darwin “adopts” (NN *Clarel* 2.11.16) from Shelley read:

None can reply—all seems eternal now.  
The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt. (Darwin 169; Shelley 91)

In *Clarel*, Melville transforms this passage into:

Darwin quotes  
From Shelley, that forever floats  
Over all desert places known,  
Mysterious doubt—an awful one. (NN *Clarel* 2.11.13–16)

Darwin—and in turn Melville—omits the lines that immediately follow in Shelley’s poem, in which the “mysterious tongue” of the wilderness might also be said to teach “faith so mild, / So solemn, so serene, that man may be, / But for such faith, with nature reconciled” (Shelley 91). In confronting scenes of such desolation—Shelley’s “naked countenance of the earth” (92)—both Darwin and Melville accentuate the lesson of “awful doubt” as part of the mind’s sublime education (Pyle; Ra’ad 132–39). For Darwin, this wilderness of doubt at the same time “excites” a vague but forceful feeling of pleasure: “Yet in passing over these scenes, without one bright object near, an ill-defined but strong sense of pleasure is vividly excited. One asked how many ages the plain had thus lasted, and how many more it was doomed thus to continue” (Darwin 169). Doubt takes on an atmospheric quality. It “forever floats”; it is a detached, “ill-defined” affect, not unlike the “unseen Power” Shelley articulates in the opening lines of his “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”: “The awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen among us” (Shelley 93).

For Melville, these “Sands immense” (NN *Clarel* 2.11.37) also evoke ill-defined feelings. They are at once charming yet forsaken. They are suggestive of the “horror absolute—severe” (2.11.66) of the Hebrew God (which recalls the “terrible” or “ghastly” theology Melville notes in his journal); yet, for the pure of heart, the desert is hallowed not harrowing ground. In Bezanson’s phrase, “[t]he paradox of the desert is that it may bring either beatitude or annihilation” (NN *Clarel* 581). Thus, Melville concludes “Of Deserts”: “But to pure hearts it yields no fear; / And John, he found wild honey here” (2.11.90–91). This final couplet, set off from the rest of the canto, might then be said to repeat Shelley’s claim that even if the “mountain’s voice” will not be understood by everyone, “the wise, the great, and good” might “interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel” its sublime message (2.11.91). However, by identifying the variety of possible responses to the desert throughout the canto—beatitude, beauty, piety, surrender, horror, annihilation—Melville also emphasizes that one’s experience of the desert is not tethered to it in any necessary way. He thus adumbrates a thought that finds its full articulation in William James’s *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, namely that, given a chaotic universe suffused by manifold inhuman prerogatives, our experiences are necessarily hybrid and ambiguous. As James writes: “In the case of our affectional experiences we have no permanent and steadfast purpose that obliges us to be consistent, so we find it easy to let them float ambiguously, sometimes classifying them with our feelings, sometimes with more physical realities, according to caprice or to the convenience of the moment (James 74). In *Clarel*, Melville’s characters take stock of the traditional anthropocentric ways of classifying affectional experiences. As a place supercharged with symbolic meaning, the Holy Land is a laboratory for understanding affectional experience that is not necessarily predicated on the fulfillment of meaning but is open to the manifold ways in which one can be affected by a landscape in the absence of any intuitive tie between self and nature. The poem emerges out of these ambiguities, which are enunciated in terms Clarel’s irresolute heart wracked by doubt yet struggling to find confirmation of belief.

In the language of Deleuze’s notion of impersonality, inflected by James’s radical empiricism, characters are not so much individualized subjects in relation to objects as “haecceities,” sets of “relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected” (Deleuze and Guattari 261). Characters’ experiences of landscape become located in the manner in which they become implicated in an impersonal event—a horse-hoof clink off the compacted stones of the Via Dolorosa, a sunrise on Mount Olivet, a wind that wafts the desert sand into a vision of wheat. If *Clarel*’s characters take positions in a series of labyrinthine, philosophical dialogues,

they do so as imbricated in the Holy Land's dynamic spaces. Questions of faith or doubt, of scientific or technological progress, and of politics or aesthetics, that is, are dramatized as impersonal configurations of concept, precept, and affect. This approaches the "calm impersonal thinking" with which Arsić endows Ishmael, and by which "Melville turns ontology into geology" in *Moby-Dick* (Arsić 6). *Clarel's* ontology becomes both geological and meteorological. Characters' identities petrify and crumble and become borne on the wind. They swirl for a moment into local referential assemblages, before they, "like clouds, / depart" (Shelley 94). As the relationship of character and space is emancipated from the fixed identity-coordinates of subjects in relationship to substances or things, characterological identity disperses into relations of movements and affects.

What could be called Melville's "characterization," then, often occurs through a play of the landscape with the "circumambient air" (*Billy Budd* 517). Characters become conjoined to appellations that underscore their indistinguishability from the inhuman world, appellations of stone and light. "Pale" Clarel "leaves behind" a "Dusked Olivet" and "vanishes" into the "obscurer town" (4.34.54, 56); Derwent's diaphanous optimism colors the waste expanses as twilight; by contrast, Mortmain wanders the "gray places of the earth" and wears his black skullcap, a portable Golgotha (2.4.130). In the cantos that couple characters, varied tonalities of light and stone contrast and collide, as for example when Derwent and Clarel ascend Mar Saba in "In Confidence":

Upon that pile, to catch the dawn,  
Alert next day see Derwent stand  
With Clarel. All the mountain-land  
Disclosed through Kedron far withdrawn,  
Cloven and shattered, hushed and banned,  
Seemed poised as in chaos true,  
Or throe-rock of transitional earth  
When old forms are annulled, and new  
Rebel, and pangs suspend the birth.  
That aspect influenced Clarel. Fair  
Derwent's regard played elsewhere—  
Expectant. Twilight gray took on  
Suffusion faint of cherry tone.  
The student marked it; but the priest  
Marked whence it came: "Turn, turn—the East! (3.21.11–25)

Clarel's suspended belief is conjoined to the predawn mountain-land poised in chaos and to the birth "throes" of new forms of light and rock about to be brought forth. If, on the one hand, Clarel's doubt prevents him from being

“with nature reconciled,” then Derwent’s unclouded faith, on the other hand, disallows this “aspect” to influence him; he looks to the east, expectant.

### Faces of Stone

Concerning the question of subjectivity and landscape in American writing, Sharon Cameron writes that the novel:

vacillates between positing its subject fleshed in human terms and positing it hewn from the land itself. Indeed, the most frequent configuration of the subject may be construed as a fracture or confusion . . . in which the subject draws its features partly from the human visage and partly from the face of the land. . . . Person or land, it barely seems to matter, as if American novels had abandoned all interest in representational coherence. The content of the representation is immaterial, or it changes material, more concerned with designating and destroying boundaries than with the content that makes them up (*Corporeal Self* 57–58).

*Clarel* literalizes this transaction of the human face with the face of the earth—the “actual visage of a place” (NN *Clarel* 1.1.113). Often the face becomes the intersection of the physical and affective landscape, if not a catastrophic point at which the human withdraws into it. In “The Hamlet,” as the cavalcade makes its way eastward over Mount Olivet, Rolfe’s face registers the “indifference” of human and nature as both become faces of meekness:

Rolfe spake not, but he bent his brow.  
 Aside glanced Clarel on the face  
 Of meekness; and he mused: In thee  
 Methinks similitude I trace  
 To Nature’s look in Bethany. (2.6.18–22)

Rolfe’s bent brow is indistinguishable from the “look” of the Bethany landscape. Creases of the brow extend into fissures coursing through the rock: “To me yon crag’s brow-beating brow / Looks horrible—and I say so” (2.30.73–74). The brow becomes the site of inscription and erasure—what Wyn Kelley calls an “ephemeral text”—a face of stone to be written across, or a brow turned to the erasing elements. This condition of erasure is evident in “The rock’s “turn[ed] brow” of “The Inscription,” where “sun and rain, and wind, with grit / Driving . . . haste to cancel it” (NN *Clarel* 2.31.101–2). Elsewhere, the lined-brow complicates the separation of the human and animal: “a Bethlehemite whose brow / Was wrinkled like the bat’s shrunk hide” (2.34.47–48). As in the contrast between Derwent and Clarel, in “Concerning Hebrews,” Melville marks the difference between Margoth, the “geologist Jew” and Spinoza via the position of the brow: “Not his Spinoso’s starry brow,” that “high intelligence

but dreamed— / Above delusion's vulgar plain / Deluded still" (2.22.110, 122–24). For reticent Vine, the brow is briefly the site of the blush of the soul upon beholding a rainbow above the Dead Sea in "By the Marge": "For Vine, over him suffusive stole / An efflorescence; all the soul / Flowering in flush upon the brow" (2.29.138–40). In "Epilogue," on the "adamantine brow" of the Sphynx, despair scrawls its "bitter pasquinade" (4.35.4–6).

Such invocations of the brow resonate across Melville's *oeuvre*. Indeed, they could be cross-listed to a series of prosopopeitic passages in which Melville uses the brow to register the physical world. *Moby-Dick* offers manifold instances: in "The Sphynx," "whole thunder-clouds [are] swept aside from [Ahab's] brow" at the sight of a sail (NN MD 250). In "The Prairie" (as in *Clarel's* "In Confidence"), Melville explicitly links thinking and the physiognomy—or phrenology—of the brow to the landscape: "In thought, a fine human brow is like the East when troubled with the morning" (274). In "The Chart," Ahab's wrinkled brow "marks out lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead" (198), so to unfold a cartography of the face. In each case, the brow becomes the site of the inscription of the inhuman world across the human face; the brow not so much sets apart the human from the inhuman world as it is a trope of their indistinction.

In *Clarel*, the blurring of the human face with the inhuman face of the earth is a mutual defacement, poignantly treated in "Huts" and "The Gate of Zion," in which Clarel visits Jerusalem's leper community. The lepers, whose "stone huts face the stony wall" (NN *Clarel* 1.25.1), merge with the wall, so many wasted Bartlebys. Struck by these living figures of decomposition, the narrator and Clarel both come to question their status as humans: "But who crouch here? / Have these been men?" (1.25.15–16); "Clarel shrank: / And he, is *he* of human rank?" (1.26.62–63). In "Huts," Melville compounds references to the history of Christian charity to the leper in Jerusalem (including Sybella, the sister of Baldwin IV of Jerusalem known as "the leper of the leprous," who, as Melville relates, tended to the afflicted "under Zion's brow" (1.25.81)) in order to set up Clarel's encounter with these "trunk[s] of woe" (1.26.75). In "The Gate of Zion," Clarel and Nehemiah come "face to face" with a "sad crew" of lepers:

As Clarel entered with the guide,  
Beset they were by that sad crew—  
With inarticulate clamor plied;  
And faces, yet defacements too,  
Appealed to them; but could not give  
Expression. There, still sensitive,



Our human nature, deep inured  
In voiceless visagelessness, yearned. (1.26.1–8)

Behold the man—faceless, voiceless. As liminal figures between life and death, the human and inhuman, and “in voiceless visagelessness,” the lepers exist as objects of the “averted” eye of Christian charity: “Unfriended, save that man bestows / (His eye averting) chanceful pence / Then turns, and shares disgust of sense” (1.25.89–91). Like Clarel’s failed appeal for meaning to “crag, turret, and star,” the lepers cannot give expression to their condition, nor bear witness to their suffering. Nehemiah at first seems blind because of his faith: “His soul pre-occupied and freed / From actual objects thro’ the sway / Of visionary scenes intense— / The wonders of a mystic day / And Zion’s old magnificence” (1.26.20–24). Nonetheless, he recognizes in the “disfeatured clay” of one leper a “friend in Christ” who “shall go / In Paradise and be re-clad” (1.26.65, 71, 68–70). He is a “fellow-man”; indeed, Clarel later learns that Nehemiah proved to be the “Sole friend” of the unfriended leper (1.26.72,75). As figures of disfeatured clay, Melville’s lepers merge with the disfeatured clay of the land around.<sup>7</sup> They become half-dead figures, or living figures of decomposition, by which the human rejoins the earth. They are fatally conscripted to the army of the dead that encroaches on the city; they are already part of its walls. They are at once a way station on the pilgrimage to death and living stone monuments to themselves.

Across *Clarel*, Melville recasts the stony passages from his journal, breaking up his earlier experiences to refit them into its poetic architecture. Melville’s scene of writing is a pile of stones: “Dumb stones” (NN *Clarel* 1.16.95), “Dead unctuous stones” (2.37.73), and “rude terraced stones” (3.8.38); “stones as in a ruin laid” (2.14.121); “Stones rolled from well-mouths, altar stones, / Idols of stone, memorial ones” (2.10.3–5). “By stones died Naboth; stoned to death / Was Stephen meek: and Scripture saith, / Against even Christ they took up stones” (2.10.20–22). “All, all’s geology,” as Margoth says (2.26.13). All’s a language of stone, inscribed onto the mute cartography of the sea-desert. Jerusalem of the blank towers, a “Stony metropolis of stones” (4.2.12), the obscurer town into which Clarel vanishes.

Stones, as Samuel Otter has shown, “accumulate throughout the poem” to the point that they take on the aspects of characters” (Otter 471). Yet as Melville draws meaning from these stones, they bear witness to the breakdown of the system of representation that makes possible the translation of a stony Judea into a Holy Land. Shelley’s “unremitting interchange” with the clear universe of things” before the “Dizzying ravine” of the Arve petrifies into the cleft of the Kedron valley, where “throe-rock of transitional earth / When old

forms are annulled, and new / Rebel, and pangs suspend the birth" (3.21.17–19). *Clarel's* stony form of iambic tetrameter registers this suspension, or becomes the form of this suspension—the form of doubt. In the final analysis, Melville's pilgrims may indeed belong to another age; an age that bereft of metaphysical certainties becomes lost in the immensity of the physical. It is a new stone age of modernity. Thus, Melville comes to rewrite the "Ecce Homo" in *Clarel* as a new imperative: "Behold the stones!" (2.10.30).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank John Bryant, Wyn Kelley, Hilton Obenzinger, and Basem Ra'ad for all of their invaluable comments on this essay.

<sup>2</sup>For a further investigation of the philosophical implications of Deleuze's reading of Melville, see Jonik 21–44.

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed reading of Melville's Jerusalem as an urban space, see Kelley, *Melville's City* 234–76.

<sup>4</sup>In "Shelley's Vision," for example, Melville alludes to Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" explicitly and more subtly to "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Epipsychidion" (NN *Published Poems* 283).

<sup>5</sup>An alternative reading for "terrific" in this passage is "ghastly." For a discussion, see Ra'ad, "Ancient Lands" 139.

<sup>6</sup>Basem Ra'ad also developed this notion in his opening remarks during the Melville and the Mediterranean conference in Jerusalem, June 2009.

<sup>7</sup>A few years before Melville's visit, Flaubert also traveled to the Holy Land and the Levant, visiting a group of people afflicted with leprosy outside Damascus. As in the case of Melville's descriptions, Flaubert's lepers take on aspects of the surrounding landscape. See the letter dated September 4, 1850 (Flaubert 682–83).

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